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On vacation from Yale, Al McCoy came across the first clues that enabled him to untangle the web of intrigue involving America's national security agency in the Vietnam heroin epidemic

HOW THE C.I.A. GOT HOOKED ON HEROIN

by Thomas Buckley

The whipping elephant grass tore at his black pajamas. The monsoon rain turned the red earth to gluey mud that pulled at his boots. A creeper vine hooked his spectacles and pulled them off. Pressing flat against the ground, he twisted his body and groped blindly until he found them. For a moment he lost sight of his Laotian interpreter and his Australian photographer. And the flat crack-crack-crack of the automatic rifles continued. He heard the bite of the bullets through the air over his head, heard them thudding into the sodden hillside behind them, and Alfred W. McCoy, doctoral candidate at Yale University, thought to himself, "What the hell am I doing here? I feel like the patsy in one of those Eric Ambler thrillers. Suddenly everyone wants to kill me."

Sitting in his modest apartment in New Haven one day recently, Al McCoy was inclined to laugh it all off, but there are experienced intelligence officials who still wonder how he got back to the United States alive. Many men who take on the Mafia, the Unione Corse, the South Vietnamese, Laotian and Thai governments, not to mention the Central Intelligence Agency and its private armies, don't.

But perhaps because he's tough enough behind his spectacles and his diffident manner to have played pre-school football and rowed on the Columbia crew, hasn't learned the bad habits of professional journalists and is still young enough at 27 to be sure he's going to live forever, McCoy got away with it. He came back to write a book, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, that ripped the veil of secrecy from one of the grimmest sides of the American involvement in that part of the world, besides being one of the best pieces of investigative reporting published in the last 20 years.

What McCoy put together was a devastating and amply documented indictment of the C.I.A. and the motley collection of warlords it has been supporting for as long as it has been for their responsibility for the heroin epidemic that engulfed American troops in Vietnam in 1970 and has since

swelled the estimated number of addicts in the United States to 500,000 or more. The cost in ruined lives, packed jails, and losses in the robberies and assaults that these addicts will commit for years to come to support their addictions will add substantially to the \$150 billion or more that this country squandered in its ill-starred Vietnam adventure.

While President Nixon was bargaining with the Turkish government to reduce its opium crop, supposedly the source of most of the heroin coming into the United States, and other so-called experts were arguing that Communist China and North Vietnam were secretly running the traffic into South Vietnam, McCoy found persuasive evidence, now becoming generally accepted, that 70% of the world supply of illicit opium was being grown in the inaccessible mountain valleys of the "Golden Triangle" of northern Burma and Laos.

More important, he found out that between the simple tribesmen who grew the stuff—and seldom used it themselves except in case of illness—and the ultimate consumer in American cities, it was our "anti-communist" allies who were making fortunes out of this crop of misery. Not surprisingly, the C.I.A., which has grown accustomed to operating outside the law all over the world, tried to suppress the book by threatening McCoy's publisher with libel actions. When the agency failed to produce a convincing case against the book, the master spies of Langley, Va., in effect were admitting what anyone, including this writer, who has spent any time in Southeast Asia already knew—that he was absolutely right.

"I first got interested in Vietnam when I was studying for my master's degree at Stanford," McCoy told me. "I wrote an article on Pan American World Airways' profits out of the Vietnam war for *Ramparts* and then I edited a collection of articles on Laos. After it appeared in January, 1971, my editor at Harper & Row suggested that there might be a book in the Golden Triangle. The opium had been mentioned in newspaper and no one had ever tried to pull it all together and get to the bottom of it."

During his spring vacation at Yale that year, McCoy went to Paris. There he talked not only to Vietnamese and Laotian political exiles but also to former officials of the French colonial government of Indo-China, which comprised present-day North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. He found to his amazement that doors that should have remained firmly shut swung open to the young unknown graduate student.

Maurice Belleux, now an executive in a helicopter concern, received him in his apartment. He was once head of the Service de Documentation Exterieur et du Contre-Espionage, the French equivalent of the C.I.A., in Indo-China. "It was amazing," McCoy recalled. "The first thing he said was, 'I bet you want to know how we ran the opium traffic during the first Indo-China War. Here, let me draw you a chart.' The chart in the book is the chart he drew for me."

Unlike the C.I.A., Belleux' organization was kept on a tight budget, inadequate to pay for its informers, its hired assassins and all the other expenses of an intelligence organization that government accountants prefer to know nothing about. Beginning in 1946, when the French colonialists were trying to make themselves more popular with their

Vietnamese subjects by suppressing the opium traffic that they had promoted, the S.D.E.C.E. gradually took it over.

In alliance with French military intelligence, which had similar financial problems, S.D.E.C.E. took on local experts—the organized racketeers of the Union Corse and the Binh Xuyen gang of Chinese and Vietnamese, who in the last days of French rule in Saigon had virtual control of the city, even to running its police force.

"It was very strange in Paris," said McCoy, who speaks fluent French. "I would go to see someone I knew had been a leader of the Binh Xuyen (pronounced Bin-Zwin), which was an absolutely merciless, ferocious outfit—one of them was Van Sang, who at one time had been the head of the national police—and he would be sitting in his luxury apartment, talking absolutely calmly about the worst sort of murders and tortures."

Before he left Paris, McCoy had a pretty good idea of the extent of the traffic, not only in the 1950s but also—and here his sources were the tens of thousands of Vietnamese who make the French capital their home—down to the present day. He told his publisher what he had found out, and Harper & Row